Palmerton Zinc
Natural Resource Damage Assessment

Appalachian Trail Restoration

Assessment of Trail Impacts and Identification of Hiking-Related Restoration Projects

The Palmerton Zinc Pile Superfund Site in PA is the site of a former zinc smelting operation. For most of the 20th Century, the Palmerton, PA facility emitted large quantities of metals that were deposited in the Palmerton area including Blue Mountain and nearby watersheds. While the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency continues clean-up efforts, Federal and State trustee agencies are conducting a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA). Monies and land recovered through the NRDA process will be used to restore, replace, or acquire the equivalent of the injured public resources in order to compensate the public for lost services provided by those resources.

This Fact Sheet describes an assessment of impacts to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT) on Blue Mountain. The AT is managed cooperatively by the National Park Service, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), volunteers from 30 local AT Clubs, the USDA Forest Service, and other public land-managing agencies. It offers a variety of opportunities for viewing spectacular scenery, for exploring, for adventure, for exercise, for nature study, and for renewal.

Overview

Metals-related vegetation losses and soil erosion on Blue Mountain may have adversely impacted the condition of the Appalachian Trail (AT) and therefore negatively affected hikers. The AT Degradation Study, described below, is designed to evaluate these trail impacts and identify areas needing repair. Detailed study plans and results will be posted on the web at: www.fws.gov/contaminants/restorationplans/Palmerton.cfm. The NRDA Trustees are also exploring restoration projects that would compensate the public for these impacts. Two examples are described below, including restoration of the footpath and land acquisition and protection.

Appalachian Trail Degradation Study

This study will evaluate the impact of metals-related vegetation loss and soil erosion on the condition of the AT footpath. Potentially impacted sections of the footpath will be assessed and compared to reference sections on Blue Mountain east and west of the contaminated area. The assessment will characterize the soil and rocks on the footpath, describe groundcover vegetation in and adjacent to the footpath, and assess the condition of maintenance features such as steps and water bars.

Restoration of the Appalachian Trail Footpath

The physical condition of the AT footpath may have been degraded as a result of metals contamination, making hiking more difficult. The NRDA Trustees are exploring possibilities for restoring the footpath in the Palmerton area. Restoration will provide benefits to hikers by improving the quality and safety of the hiking experience.

Preservation of Hiking Experiences on the Appalachian Trail

Hikers' experiences may have been negatively impacted by contamination as a result of forest losses on Blue Mountain. The NRDA Trustees are exploring possibilities for acquiring forested properties adjacent to the AT corridor to preserve the hiking experience on the AT for current and future generations.

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